BWA

9.10.2026–28.02.2027

BWA Wrocław Główny
Piłsudskiego 105

SIC! BWA Wrocław
Pl. Kościuszki 9/10



The Crystal Palace

The Crystal Palace



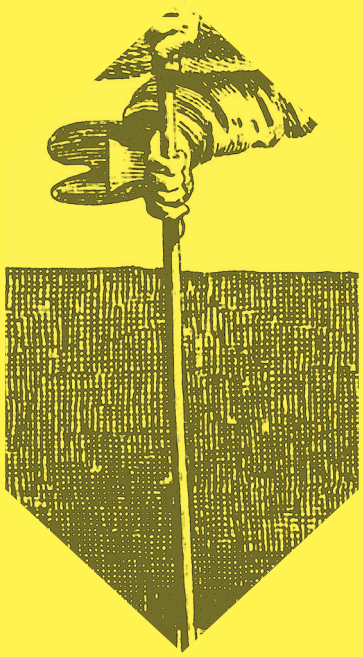
In 1851, a monumental glass-and-iron structure was erected in London's Hyde Park to house the Great Exhibition. Nothing like it had ever been built before. No one had ever attempted to bring together the contemporary accomplishments of "the whole world" within a single space. The enormous building, called, at first mockingly, the Crystal Palace, was designed by Joseph Paxton. The architect, who had previously specialized in designing palm houses and orangeries, created a structure that seemed almost impossible. The giant of prefabricated cast iron and glass embodied the miracle of progress, the work of human hands and intellect. Miracles were precisely what the undertaking was about, as the extraordinary exhibition was intended to display wonders from across the globe: works of art, raw materials, machines, manufactured goods, and colonial artifacts. The progressive West was set against Oriental, tropical, and overseas worlds, which turned the exhibition into a theater of "this world and the otherworldly," where everything seemed within arm's reach. This multifaceted story of excess fostered a belief that the world was wondrous, and that modern civilization was powerful enough to explore it and bring it closer.

To house "the whole world" within a single interior was a daunting task. Therefore, the Crystal Palace promised more: not just to contain it all, but also to do so in a transparent and orderly manner. After all, to see everything is to know everything. The same gesture of embracing the whole world with a single gaze was made by other popular modern institutions of the time: natural history museums, ethnographic museums, zoos, and botanical gardens. The underlying idea was to collect and systematize magnificent plants, animals, stones and minerals, sculptures, paintings, devices, and groundbreaking inventions because the world known to people at the time had become too vast not to do so.

Soon, people across Europe and beyond were dreaming a similar dream. Successive incarnations of the Crystal Palace sprang up like mushrooms in Madrid, Prague, Vienna, Munich, New York, and Sydney. Even Breslau, a rather provincial city, gained its own cast-iron and glass pavilions. One was erected in

what is now Wolności Square, and the other in Staszica Square. Rather than just reflecting an aspiration to be progressive or a desire to participate in the colonial division of the world, the collective fervor also stemmed from the conviction that noble, transparent architecture was capable of remedying "the whole world" by exposing and then abolishing its inequalities.

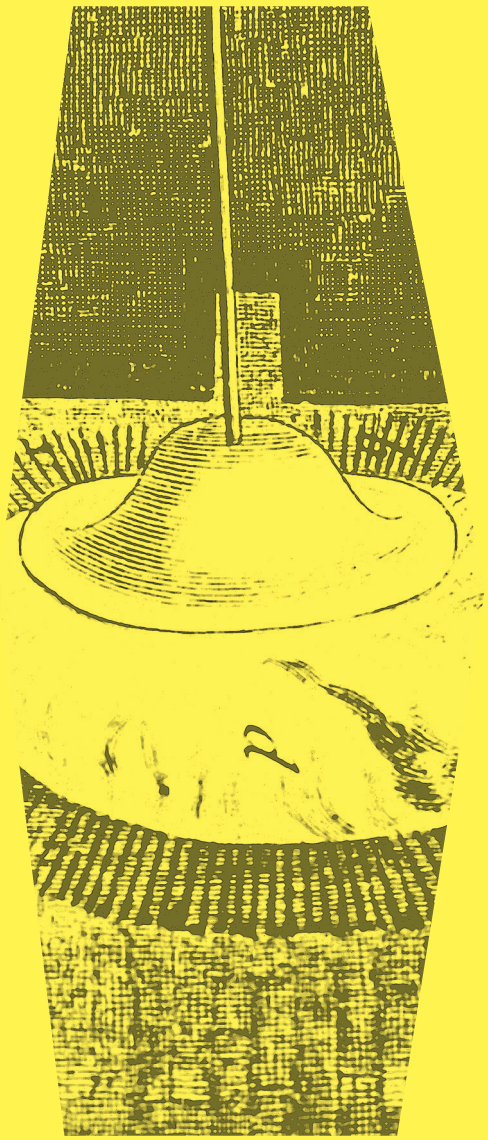
Glass proved to be more than just a construction material or an achievement of 19th-century technology. Over time, it became one of the languages of modernity. Glass houses came to symbolize a new order, with their transparency promising fair distribution of wealth and public life founded on truth. Transparency ceased to be just a property of glass. It became a way of thinking about the world and a vision of reality in which everything could be seen, ordered, and understood.



Every dream, however, comes with a price. A pane of glass, though invisible, will never disappear altogether. It remains a thin boundary between what is near and what is inaccessible. It allows us to see something, but prevents us from touching it. It opens up a landscape while simultaneously bracketing it. The less we see a pane, the stronger its impact on how we see. This crack—between openness and separation, visibility and control—reveals a contradiction of modernity that we still experience today.

This is evident both in the architecture of the railway station, which houses the BWA Wrocław Główny gallery (the building is only five years younger than London's Crystal Palace), and in the display windows of the SIC! gallery in Kościuszko Square. Both venues reflect the afterimages of modernization myths that we have inherited and continue to live with in these interesting times.

The Crystal Palace exhibition is split into two venues and combines two areas of our curatorial interests: the history of modernity and the medium of glass. One might ask: what is the point of revisiting a story that dates almost two centuries back? The answer can be found in the symbolic image captured in engravings from that period: the glass giant appears



infinite, and at its feet, crowds swarm so densely that human faces are no longer visible—only a sea of heads. This area enclosed under a single transparent roof can indeed be called a "Grand Interior."

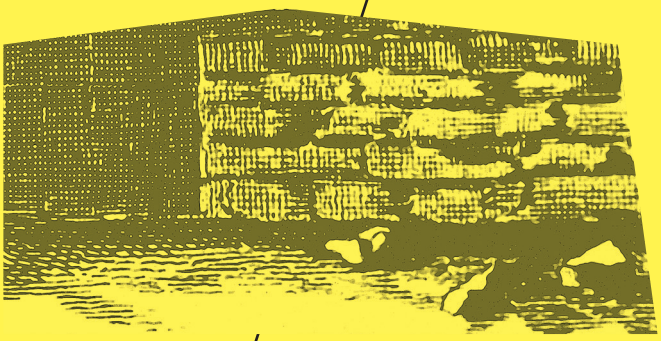
And yet, the prosperity and greenhouse-like conditions that prevail inside are not available to all. Only some benefit from them, while others must remain outside, watching what happens within through the glass panes. The "Grand Interior" thus becomes a metaphor for a world divided between those who occupy its very center and those who remain on the peripheries.

Our idea is not simply to use this metaphor to criticize the existing order of things. We also seek to take a closer look at the promise of modernity to create new worlds, if often at the expense of existing ones. Despite the distance of almost two centuries, we continue to experience the same tension. Our creations fill us with hope and disappointment both. We delight in, and are simultaneously terrified by, what we as humans are capable of.

In *The Crystal Palace* exhibition, we explore some of the micro-stories associated with this architectural marvel and the concept of transparency. We tell about the trees which were enclosed by the glass pavilion, the sparrows living within, plants shipped from distant continents, and the first public flush toilets. These seemingly trivial stories allow us to look at the Crystal Palace from a different perspective—not by reference to a grand narrative of progress, but through peripheral topics. The micro-stories crack open the glass roof of the narrative, shedding light on what has largely remained unseen. We delve into this unfulfilled and fulfilled promise, whose charm was once so difficult to resist.

Mika Drozdowska and Joanna Kobyłt

SIC!
BWA
Wrocław



Aleksander Baszynski
Erin Dickson
Wiktor Dyndo
Krista Israel
Klaudia Kasperska
Paweł Szeibel

Krista Israel
Times Gravity
2025, glass, sound

Cages are constructed of metal. They should be robust, visible, and leave no doubt where freedom ends. A glass cage is therefore a paradoxical object. It does not obstruct the view, lets light in, is delicate-looking, and is hardly visible. The less we notice it, the easier it is for us to believe there is no barrier.

Perhaps this is why glass so powerfully captured people's imagination in the 19th century. When designing the Crystal Palace, Joseph Paxton was drawing on the experience he had gained when building greenhouses and orangeries. Transparent walls allowed the gaze to wander beyond the interior, even though its boundaries remained intact. For some, the palace embodied a belief in progress. For others—like the hero of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*—it symbolized a future that would leave no room for doubt or rebellion. A perfectly ordered world then begins to resemble another form of enslavement.

Krista Israel's work echoes this paradox, but on a completely different scale. The huge glass structure gives way here to delicate cages. This rescaling exercise also shifts the focus: from monumental architecture to inner experience. The glass forms suspended in the space seem to remain in constant tension between permanence and disintegration. The interior is filled with the continual, piercing sound of cracking glass. This echo of a single shatter, stretched over time, returns again and again, as if the fracturing moment had been arrested, never having a chance to resonate fully.

The title *Times Gravity* connects temporality with gravitational forces, imbuing temporariness with a weight of its own. As time passes, our experiences, beliefs, and ideas pile up. The cages seem to yield to this weight—dropping lower and lower to ultimately smash against the floor. The shattering lasts only a fleeting moment. And yet, it is enough to reveal the boundary that has remained invisible all along.

Paweł Szeibel
object from the *Wardian Cases* series
2019–2026, glass, metal

Behind its glass walls, the Crystal Palace displayed the riches and resources imported from various parts of the British Empire. The Great Exhibition

afforded a visible, almost tangible form to its might. Raw materials, various commodities, and even specimens of exotic plants and animals testified to the immense reach of colonial power and the potential for sourcing wealth from distant territories. Nature itself was drawn into the same circuit—exploited, transported, and reintroduced into new environments.

In the 19th century, such relocation was made possible inter alia by Wardian cases—glass containers in which living plants could survive a weeks-long voyage across the ocean. Glass created a separate microclimate protecting them from changing exposures, letting in light, and retaining moisture. Uprooted from their natural environment, plants received a substitute—a small enclosure capable of sustaining life. However, this protection came with a flip side. It was precisely the possibility of safe shipment that allowed new species to be moved across the globe, established in new environments, and integrated into the empire's trade networks.

In the Crystal Palace itself, the relationship between architecture and nature developed differently. Joseph Paxton, the horticulturist and greenhouse designer who created the building, preserved the elm trees that were growing in Hyde Park, incorporating them within the structure. Rather than being felled, the trees remained in place, encased by the glass architecture. They found themselves within a monumental shell, with the boundary between the park and the interior delimited around them. Nature stayed in place, but the context in which it could be viewed changed.

Paweł Szeibel's case is empty. There is no plant inside that would need to be protected during a journey or prepared for living in new conditions. What remains is the glass and structure—a form that stores the memory of its original function. The emptiness shifts the emphasis, with the gaze no longer focusing on what might have been inside, but on the exploitation and relocation mechanisms.

The Wardian case on display in the SIC! gallery engages with Aleksander Baszynski's painting of a burning palm tree. The empty container, devoid of a plant to be protected, stands beside a picture

of a tree engulfed in flames, which is a vision of contemporary disaster. Along with the Crystal Palace elms, they make up a narrative about the changing relationship between humanity and nature. For centuries, we have been subordinating the latter to our own needs by moving its components from place to place and transplanting them into frameworks of our own making. Today, this perspective is being reversed, with the implications of ongoing developments confronting us with the question of how to preserve the space necessary for nature to survive.

Aleksander Baszynski
Hot Morning
2026, oil on canvas

The palm typically evokes imagery of a distant, exotic world. Brought along with other plants to European orangeries and palm houses, palms transformed their interiors into a semblance of tropical scenery. Enclosed by glass, they came to form habitats of translocated, domesticated nature, upon which a new order was being imposed.

In Aleksander Baszynski's work, the palm reappears, this time engulfed in flames. The fire does not hit it suddenly, but disfigures it slowly, disrupting the peacefulness otherwise associated with the trees. As the palm burns, so does the picture of a world that was supposed to cater for human desires forever, whose most distant corners could be brought within reach, whose otherness could be domesticated, and whose boundaries could be moved as we deemed fit.

The burning palm removes a comfortable distance. What could once be brought into an orangery, encased by glass, and viewed from a safe vantage point is no longer merely an object of fascination. The fire reverses the gaze: wonder gives way to unease, and the viewer loses confidence in their own position. It is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the illusion that the consequences of human interference with nature will remain far-off. The distance that once allowed us to look at them from a safe perspective is shrinking as we experience changes that increasingly impact us as well.

Baszynski's palm tree offers no promise of another world. It burns before our eyes, leaving us with a question about the sustainability of an order

founded on the belief that nature can endlessly be treated as a commodity.

Wiktor Dyndo
from the *State of Crisis* series
2023–2025, oil on canvas

After it had been relocated to Sydenham Hill, London's Crystal Palace burned to the ground in 1936. It was not, however, the only incarnation of the idea to have suffered this fate. New York's Crystal Palace went up in flames in 1858, and Munich's Glaspalast in 1931. The causes of the fires were not always discovered. In the case of the German pavilion, the investigation found that the fire had been deliberately set.

There is a certain irony to this turn of history: a structure meant to be a triumph of modernity became a spectacle heralding the demise of modernist ideas. Watching the fire, Winston Churchill is said to have remarked: "This is the end of an age," which aptly summarizes the fate of the building, which had always been conceived as an embodiment of faith in the future.

Crisis emerges when you are in a state of suspension, when you are aware of a danger and anticipate likely developments. In an age of ubiquitous and continuous information reaching us from omnipresent screens, we become passive participants of dramatic events: wars, disasters, and social unrest. Our experience of the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine has further unsettled our sense of stability, making crisis increasingly less a distant occurrence and more a part of our everyday lives.

In his *State of Crisis* body of work, Wiktor Dyndo depicts stately interiors of palaces—buildings associated with power, order, and stability. The staircases, columns, and marble surfaces from his paintings evoke a sense of permanence, one of architecture's fundamental promises. In addition to inspiring awe, a palace is meant to endure for centuries and testify to the historical and political might of its founders. Palaces are displays of power—architecture to be viewed as manifestations of influence, permanence, and control.

In Dyndo's paintings, the promise of endurance is held in suspension. Behind a column, on the horizon,

dark and ominous storm clouds build up, smoke curls between column capitals, and tongues of flame emerging from air vents transform images of power into landscapes of anxiety. These are pictures of suspense, of the eve of a catastrophe, when the threat already looms large, but its consequences remain unknown.

Erin Dickson
Business as Usual
2022, mirror, steel

The phrase "business as usual" denotes situations where previous behaviors and mechanisms persist even though circumstances call for change. Erin Dickson examines this ostensible normality with a sadness tinged with irony. The title sounds like calming reassurance that nothing will disrupt the familiar rhythm, even though reality increasingly contradicts this.

The Crystal Palace embodied the dreams of its era, becoming, at the same time, a monumental "showcase" closely tied to the global economy. A single glass structure brought together commodities, natural resources, machines, and inventions imported from all over the world. The Crystal Palace offered a glimpse of what more than a century later Peter Sloterdijk would call the "Grand Interior"—a space of prosperity and consumption sustained by an ever denser network of manufacturing and trade connections.

Dickson looks at this promise at a time when the latter is making its limits increasingly apparent. Climate crisis, species extinction, wars, and growing inequalities are tarnishing the picture of a world founded on the notion that growth can continue indefinitely. And yet, the rhythm of this philosophy continues unabated: produce, exchange, consume—and carry on. Business as usual.

The artist reverses the letters in the inscription, covers each of them with a mirrored surface, and then shatters them. The slogan is still legible, but it no longer forms a coherent whole, with our own reflection appearing amid the spiderweb cracks. This means that, rather than remaining detached onlookers, we become "entangled" in the image while watching it disintegrate. And perhaps this is precisely what "business as usual" is all about:

trying to live our lives as before by having our eyes accustomed to successive cracks.

Klaudia Kasperska
Optimal Intensity
2026, RGB LED panels, carbon steel, ornamental and crystal glass

For a long time, glass admitted light into interior spaces sparingly—reduced to small panes and constrained by window frame divisions. In the 19th century, the proportions began to change. As glazed surfaces were growing in size, the boundary between the interior and the exterior was becoming ever less distinct. Indeed, the Crystal Palace had no windows at all, it itself being one huge window. The Chance Brothers[1] glassworks in Smethwick had produced nearly 300,000 panes for the building, which, once assembled, created an almost fully transparent cladding of the monumental structure.

In the decades that followed, transparency began to carry a far greater promise. "Glass brings us a new era," wrote Paul Scheerbart.[2] Glass houses were meant to open up interior spaces to sunlight and fresh air, conjuring up a vision of healthier life, closer to the exterior world. Later, a similar dream of bright, spacious interiors was translated into a more pragmatic approach by modernist architects. The Athens Charter[3] regarded sunlight as one of the prerequisites for modern housing. In addition to arranging space, architecture was also expected to provide better living conditions.

At the center of the room, a viewless window hangs suspended. Rather than offering a view of the exterior world, it radiates intense pink glow that filters through pieces of antique decorative glass. Obviously, it does not emit the full spectrum of sunlight, but rather resembles the plant cultivation technologies that use selected wavelengths of the spectrum to stimulate growth. They optimize and thereby enhance radiation by extracting what is most beneficial in light. Klaudia Kasperska thus reverses the logic of the window: what is meant to admit light into an interior begins to emit light itself as if it were an artificial sun reduced to its most useful properties.

Capable of substituting sunlight, this illusion will not replace, however, what typically comes with it: a view, a sense of space, and connection with the

---

[1] Victoria and Albert Museum, "The Foundation of the V&A's Collections. The Great Exhibition of 1851," https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-great-exhibition-of-1851.

[2] Paul Scheerbart, quoted in: Marek Bieńczyk, "Trzy domy", in: *Przezroczystość*, Kraków: Znak, 2007, 164. Bieńczyk refers to Scheerbart's aphorisms written on Bruno Taut's glass pavilion in Cologne, including: "Glass brings us a new era."

[3] The Athens Charter, a manifesto which emerged from the Fourth International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) in 1933, postulated that any dwelling should be ensured a minimum period of direct sunlight during the day.

surroundings. Today, in addition to determining the quality of living, these very elements also determine how much a place is worth. Access to sunlight, which modernism championed as a basic human right, has become a commodity priceable on the market as any other one. In this way, what was once to serve the noble idea of better life is increasingly governed by the same logic of optimization, efficiency, and marketability.

Artists:	Jan Baszak, Aleksander Baszynski, Patrycja Cichosz, Erin Dickson, Wiktor Dyndo, Krista Israel, JMB (John "Sleepy" Moran and Marta Byrdziak), Klaudia Kasperska, John "Sleepy" Moran, Richard Mosse, Yinka Shonibare, Tom Swoboda, Paweł Szeibel
Curators:	Mika Drozdowska, Joanna Kobyłt
Exhibition design and visual identification:	Szymon Zakrzewski
Production:	Gabriela Pezda, Bazyli Stoykov, Patrycja Ścisłowska
Production manager:	Monika Muszyńska
Promotion:	Agata Kalinowska, Berenika Nikodemska, Jagoda Olczyk, Agata Połeć, Żaneta Wańczyk
Assembly:	Ioannis Anastasiou, Bartek Buczek, Łukasz Bałaciński, Daria Chraścina, Jakub Jakubowicz, Daniel Mroczyński, Jakub Jan Robaszewski, Natan Studencki, Krzysztof Szczudluk
Assembly manager:	Tomasz Koczoń
Exhibition design assistance:	Eva Kozárova
Audience engagement:	Julianna Biesok, Adrianna Duda, Barbara Kaczmarek, Eva Kozárova, Beata Marszałek, Agnieszka Michoń, Joanna Synowiec, Magdalena Weber, Maja Widera
Head of education and audience engagement:	Iwona Kałuża
Accessibility coordination:	Magdalena Weber
Contracts:	Beata Gawrysiuk
Accounting	
Editorial oversight:	Joanna Osiewicz-Lorenzutti
English translation:	Krzysztof Kowalczyk

Fundraising:	Małgorzata Sobolewska, Joanna Sokalska
Main partner:	Huta Szkła Kryształowego “Julia”
Partner venue:	Good Good
Media patrons:	*Vogue Polska Living*, *Contemporary Lynx*, Trójka—Program Trzeci Polskiego Radia, Radio RAM, Radio Wrocław Kultura, Radio Wrocław, TVP3 Wrocław, TVP Info, TVP Kultura, *Pismo Artystyczne Format*
BWA Wrocław program:	Katarzyna Roj
BWA Wrocław director:	Maciej Bujko
Organizer:	BWA Wrocław Galleries of Contemporary Art

Co-financed by the Minister for Culture and National Heritage from the Cultural Promotion Fund—state special purpose fund.

Main partner:

Julia
CENTRUM RZEMIOSŁA

Media patrons:

VOGUE POLSKA LIVING

CONTEMPORARY LYNX

format

TVP KULTURA

TVP INFO

TVP 3 WROCŁAW

Trójka POLSKIE RADIO

RADIO RAM 89,8

RADIO WROCŁAW KULTURA

80 LAT RADIO WROCŁAW

Ministerstwo Kultury
i Dziedzictwa Narodowego

Co-financed by the Minister for Culture and National Heritage from the Cultural Promotion Fund—state special purpose fund.

Wrocław
miasto spotkań